

Obama disarmament speech 'a world changing moment'

David Krieger | Apr. 7, 2009



Peace rally in Budapest

In a remarkable speech [1] for any American leader, President Obama, speaking in Prague on April 5, 2009, provided new hope for a world free of nuclear weapons.

"I state clearly and with conviction," he said, "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." He told his audience that America, as the only country to have used nuclear weapons, "has a moral responsibility to act."

For many years the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation has been calling for US leadership for a nuclear weapons-free world, based on the understanding that if the US does not lead, significant progress will not be possible. For the past two presidential terms this leadership has been largely lacking.

During the George W. Bush presidency, the US was the leading obstacle to nuclear disarmament. Now, with President Obama, there is a dramatic shift and the goal of US leadership for a nuclear weapons-free world that once seemed far distant, if not impossible, appears at hand.

President Obama's speech in Prague was a world changing moment, a promise of unprecedented historical change on the most profoundly dangerous issue confronting not only America but the world. In this speech he recognized the imperative for our common security of eliminating nuclear weapons and of America's unique moral responsibility to lead this effort.

He made it clear that while America cannot do it alone, it will lead by its actions. He called for "concrete steps," including reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US national security strategy and urging other nuclear weapons states to do the same, reducing the number of nuclear weapons in its arsenal, working aggressively for US ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, seeking a new treaty to end production of fissile materials for weapons, strengthening the Non-Proliferation Treaty, creating an international fuel bank to reduce the risks of proliferation, assuring that nuclear weapons will not be acquired by terrorists, and leading an international effort to gain control of vulnerable nuclear materials throughout the world within four years.

President Obama recognized that a world without nuclear weapons "will not be reached quickly." He cautioned that such a world may not occur within his lifetime, and that achieving it will require "patience and persistence." But this was not a speech about timeframes or deadlines. It was a speech setting forth a much needed vision and providing a promise of US leadership. He has taken an important step toward the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world by articulating this vision and committing to work toward it. Now a more comprehensive plan must be formulated and implemented.

With the political will that President Obama has provided, it is possible that we could move far more rapidly toward a world of zero nuclear weapons than could previously be imagined. Political will and US leadership have been the most significant missing elements for achieving a world free of nuclear weapons. Now that these elements are in place, we may be surprised by how quickly the planning and implementation process can proceed toward the total global elimination of these unconscionable weapons.

President Obama is a man of great vision, a leader that sees beyond the horizon. When he encounters a problem requiring change, he addresses it and proposes solutions. His leadership on the issue of a nuclear weapons-free world comes none too soon. In his speech, he has faced the threat of nuclear weapons squarely. The vision and the initial steps toward achieving it that he has articulated deserve our strong support.

As President Obama noted, there will be many who will say that it cannot be done. But these naysayers cannot steal the future from those who seek a world free of nuclear threat or those committed to building a world at peace. The President will need the American people standing with him and saying, "Yes, we can."

David Krieger is President of the [Nuclear Age Peace Foundation](#). [2]

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